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ABSTRACT

Over the years, criticism of public education has given rise to reform and renewal. This paper describes what is right with education. The following positive developments have occurred within the last 2 decades: (1) increased student enrollment and retention; (2) improved literacy; (3) improved student performance on standardized tests; (4) a rise in enrollment at institutions of higher education; (5) high-quality, professional educators who provide a variety of services; (6) improved educational technology; and (7) widespread public satisfaction with the quality of education. Other improvements include an upgrading of curriculum, closer monitoring of student progress, enhancement of testing systems, increased emphasis on academics, higher graduation standards, and countless experimental models for instructional methods and school organization. Moreover, initiatives for improvement have arisen from new sources--teachers, parents, government officials, and members of the business community. (LMI)

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WHAT'S RIGHT WITH AMERICAN PUBLIC EDUCATION?

A presentation to the National Council of Professors
of Educational Administration
by
Dr. Ronald J. Perry
Palm Springs, CA - August 9-13, 1994

Good afternoon. How fortunate I feel to be with you today discussing a matter so close to my heart: the state of American public schools!

Public education in the United States has been under attack since its inception. Over the years the waves of criticism have given birth to beaches of continual reform and renewal, a natural balance of progress. This process remains in effect.

In the last two decades, we have seen an upgrading of curriculum, closer monitoring of student progress, enhancement of testing systems, increased emphasis on academics, higher graduation standards, and countless experimental models for instructional methods and school organization. Moreover, initiatives for improvement have arisen from new sources: teachers, parents, government officials, business people. All this creative action, even when it falls short of the mark, is good in the spirit extolled by Emerson's The American Scholar.

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What is not good, however, is the Cassandra tone of contemporary critics. Listen to a sampler:

Edward Fisk - "It's no secret that American schools are failing."

Chester Finn from the U.S. Department of Education - "Educational shortcomings just make us miserable.

Lauren Resnick of the American Educational Research Association - "We all know how terrible we are." A Nation At Risk even blamed the economic woes of the prior decade on what it termed "unilateral educational disarmament."

The media, oriented by its predilection for the exceptional, headlines the worst case scenario, causing the failure of public schools to be accepted as self evident truth. Recently we are barraged with claims that American students are unable to compete with their foreign counterparts, and that public schools are inferior to private institutions within the United States. A censorious ocean erodes our scholastic beach, and the balance of progress is disturbed.

Is this woeful picture accurate? If so much is wrong with American education, is nothing right? One hundred and fifty-seven years ago, Emerson told the Phi Beta Kappas of Harvard:

"The office of the scholar is to cheer, to raise, to guide men by showing the facts amidst appearances."

I believe that an illumination of the facts will provide us with much cheer, raise some pride, and guide us to an even brighter future for our schools. Let us examine the facts.

What's right with American public education? First, more students are going to school and staying in school for longer periods of time. Over 99% of America's children attend elementary school, compared to the world average of 70%. More than 95% of America's students are enrolled in secondary school, compared to 50% worldwide. In comparing twenty-five of the leading industrialized nations on the percentage of fifteen to eighteen year olds enrolled in school, the U.S. ranks #1, far ahead of its closest competitors, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Sweden.

In 1870, 57% of 15 to 17 year olds were enrolled in American schools, but most did not attend. In 1900, 72% were enrolled, and 49% attended. By 1980, 90% of 15 to 17 year olds were enrolled, and 92% of them were attending. In 1988-90 when I served as superintendent of St. Mary Parish in Louisiana, average school attendance was over 97%. It is true that we made a concerted effort, initiating new procedures and putting community pressure on students and parents because our truancy rates had been the highest in the state. I think, however, that the endeavor was a success because we made the schools more attractive and appealing to our clients.

By 1991 public school enrollment throughout the country was 7% higher than it had been in 1984, and more than 96% of high school sophomores, juniors, and seniors either remained in school or graduated. Of course, faultfinders may choose to emphasize the drop-out; idle teenage gangs do present the dramatic photo opportunity. But facts tell us that a greater proportion of American children remain students now than at any time in the nation's history.

So, what's right with public education? More Americans are reading and reading better than ever before.

Literacy, one measure of academic efficacy, has advanced consistently among the nation's people. 11.3% of the population were functionally illiterate in 1900. Twenty years later that figure was cut in half. Since 1970, 98% of Americans are classified as literate--despite the arrival of almost eight million immigrants from more than one hundred fifty countries.

Varied studies, reported by the National Association of Progress and other groups, indicate that today's students read better than students of forty years ago. Contemporary readers in grades six and ten are notably superior to similar groups tested in 1950 when I began to teach. Data reveals that U.S. students score higher in total reading ability on international tests than any nation except Finland.

Circulation in American libraries continues to spread, showing a fifteen per cent increase in the last decade. In spite of all the alternate entertainments readily available, in spite of American children spending more hours in front of television sets than they do in front of teachers, reading retains a magnetic power. In the face of escalating cost for consumers, we buy more books, magazines, and newspapers than we ever did.

Our schools do hook people on the reading habit. (Shannon Elementary School story.)

In a factual light, the persistent whine that "Johnny Can't Read" may be judged trite, but not true.

Again, what's right with American public education? For what it's worth, the fact is that standardized test scores continue to improve. I am loathe to inundate you with more statistics. However, to paraphrase Conant, anyone speaking about American education, who wishes to be taken seriously, must get into numbers. Certainly there is validity in quantitative assessment, albeit we must never make the assumption that arithmetic can measure the sale value of a people-based system. At any rate, the numbers are not nearly so dismal as we have been led to believe.

The most recent report of the National Assessment of Educational Progress shows a significant improvement in student

mathematics performance between 1990 and 1992. Actually, achievement in reading, writing, and science has progressed over the last twenty years. Minority students, in particular, have made great strides.

On recent International Achievement Tests American students scored as well or better in math than all students, except those from the Netherlands and Japan; Americans performed better than Germans, English, Swedes, Italians, and the Dutch in science; and America was better than all nations except Italy in reading comprehension. In literature, American surpassed all nations. The Second International Mathematics study found that among eighth grade students who take algebra, Americans outperformed the Japanese. It also noted that in two mathematical areas where Americans performed poorly, measurement and geometry, there were mitigating factors. The measurement test was dominated by the metric system. Despite logic and act of Congress, we remain stubborn metric mavericks, and may require Act of God to give up the language of inches and feet. Key questions missed by our students in the geometry test dealt with transformations, which are not taught here.

I dwell at length on mathematical idiosyncrasy, not as an apologist, but to make the point that international comparisons are of the apples and oranges variety. Every nation has unique values reflected in the training of its young. We wish to educate

everyone, a concept peculiar to us. Some of our intelligentsia express horror that Americans are not first on every test, a jingoistic notion which is most unsavory. Why shouldn't Italians be better at reading; why shouldn't the Japanese be superior in computation? The United States is competitive in the world market--except for our citizens' refusal to labor for ten cents an hour. We must be more practical and more generous in evaluating the results of international tests.

Perhaps the loudest of critical laments is a reaction to declining SAT scores. The Scholastic Aptitude Test, according to the College Entrance Examination Board which created it, is supposed to predict how well students will perform in college, not to evaluate elementary and secondary school achievement. having established the function of SAT, let us analyze the most celebrated decline since Camille's.

Over the past thirty years, the average math score dropped fewer than thirty points and is now rebounding. The decline, when the scoring method is explained, means that test takers miss two and a fraction more questions than their counterparts did around 1960. They miss about six more questions on the verbal portion, which has been termed a vocabulary test of cultural literacy. Until this year, SAT criteria was developed in 1941 and had been standardized by a White, male, Northeastern elite. Obviously, our society has changed over a fifty-three year period.

Beginning in the mid 1960's, cumulatively larger numbers of students with comparatively lower high school grade averages sought college entrance. Since a much greater number of students were taking SAT, examination averages were naturally lower than those achieved by a more select group. When I began teaching only the top 25-30% of college prep students took university admission tests. Now nearly all students are tested, ergo, why are lower scores perceived as a mystery?

The decline in standardized scores in general has been seriously misrepresented. The fact is that 95% of standardized test questions depend on memorization and recall alone for correct answers. Education serves best when its aim is, not drill, but creativity, and this requires an elusive qualitative evaluation.

Yet again, what is right with American public schools? As might be presumed from our discussion of SAT scores, the level of higher education continues to rise.

Over 40% of American students are engaged in post high school education, as compared to 16% of the world average. College enrollments have doubled over the last twenty-five years. Between 1973 and 1991, the number of high school graduates going directly to college increased from 46% to 62%. Eighty-four percent of 1991's undergraduates were still enrolled in 1992. American colleges and universities attract more foreign students than those

of any other nation. Over forty percent of research articles published throughout the world are produced by American scholars. No other nation produces more than 7%. The last two items indicate that the quality of higher education has not been compromised by its hospitable character.

Do you know that we are the only nation in which every citizen can aspire to a university education? America is a country of second chances, where a drop-out has the opportunity to obtain a GED and proceed to college. Our public schools offer open access to students of all ages and backgrounds so that they may earn the credentials for further study.

What else is right about American education?

Our teachers are among the best prepared in the world, and the vast majority are dedicated professionals.

Educators in America are asked to accomplish much more than educators in any other nation. In addition to academics and related arts, today's schools are required to serve breakfast, lunch,, and snacks. We check vision, hearing, and hair; offer check-ups. We show students how to brush their teeth and even provide the fluoride. We instruct young people in good nutrition and sound hygiene. We offer speech services and recreational programs, psychological and social services. We are asked to teach

parenting, to offer Head Start, day care, pre-school, and after school programs for "latchkey kids." We were expected to integrate schools when neighborhoods looked like Armageddon. We are required to build student self-esteem and the respect for others which is essential for democracy. Our every burgeoning transportation system supplies early and late activity buses in addition to the normal runs.

Our teachers are expected to offer relevant individualized instruction to the gifted, the handicapped, and to non-English speaking students--too often simultaneously. We provide sex education and teach students how to have and not to have babies and what to do with the baby after they fail to listen. We also provide condoms. We're asked to lead the attack on health and social problems; AIDS, drug addiction, alcohol and tobacco abuse. We teach students to drive automobiles and even to ride bicycles. I am serious, and I have just scratched the surface.

If any other business was required to provide such a variety of services, and its employees retained their sanity they would be regarded with awe. Is it just to demoralize American educators by denigrating their accomplishments? Is it honest to ignore the complexity of their task?

Our schools must also keep pace with the technological revolution, and, for the most part, we have done so. Nine out of

ten computers are found in classrooms or computer labs. VCR's are becoming standard instructional tools. In addition, CD-Rom, interactive video, satellite dishes, distance learning, and computer networks are all becoming educational implements.

Finally, what's right with American education?

The majority of our clients are satisfied. Sixty per cent of the U.S. population rate their local schools as good or very good. That figure rises to 78% among parents of school age children, the people most directly involved with schools. Elitists may scoff that the common folk need to hoist their standards. Still, the contented customer is the measure of success in most enterprises. John Q. Public does foot the bill, which has increased almost geometrically over the past forty years. That its alumni have been willing to make sacrifices in support of public schools seems a strong indication of what is right with American education.

I do not wish to leave you with the impression of a complacent Pollyanna. There is certainly room for improvement in our public schools, and we are faced with many problems. We must take care lest our virtues lead to hubris.

Most people worry more about discipline. Schools have experienced, as has society in general, an increase in violence. A recent poll rates drug abuse as the #1 problem in the schools.

Assaults on teachers have increased, weapons in the hands of children constantly make the news. Who is to blame? Who should accept the major burden of responsibility for teaching young people how to behave? The school? The church? The family? Society in general? There is an African saying that the village raises the child. Our village, every part and each person, is facing a great challenge.

Nevertheless, we must maintain a sense of proportion. If six million students, and this figure is rather high, are serious discipline problems, more than thirty-eight million are not. Some children carry guns or knives into the classroom; many children make the Honor Roll. Some students sell drugs; the vast majority raise money in a million drives to help their less fortunate neighbors. These are facts that can be checked in any American newspaper. Look for the bad news on the front pages, though. The unexpected will be what we talk about. We expect our children to be wonderful. Most of them are.

We expect a great deal from our public schools, and we should. I believe that, within the constraints of human institutions, the public school continues to act as leaven for the great American experiment.

In the words of Thomas Jefferson, "Hope is so much pleasanter than despair that I always prefer looking into futurity through her glass."

Thank you.